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The following collection of poems explores the definition of ‘home’ and the speaker’s sense of their place in the world through the lenses of sexuality, religion, family, and relationships. These poems were composed over a two year course of study in the Creative Writing Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

CONDITIONAL BETHLEHEM

by  
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Approved by

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Committee Chair

## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## Why I Don't Eat Apples

Because of the bruises along my spine, behind my knee,  
when three boys on bikes came up,

sweatshirt pouches filled with crab apples,  
clumps of earth flying from wheels as they pedaled fast, fast,

faster than my feet, clumsy chopstick legs  
throwing Nike-clad soles forward. Rain

bouncing off the blacktop, dripping from my chin  
as green apples flew past my head.

Crab apples hurled from teenage hands, clipping an arm,  
exploding as they hit a road sign. *Children at Play*.

The unsuspecting smack of apples missing their target,  
rolling along the cracked pavement.

Because the sweetness reminds me of the satisfaction  
of classmates launching apples from their altar boy hands,

striking a shoulder, hitting my spine square,  
knocking out my knee as I tumbled to the pavement,

blacktop and leg and stone and skin and spit  
in my face as they rode away laughing, *Stupid faggot*—

and I lay on the side of the road, sore,  
thinking of the lie I would have to tell my parents.

Because for years I have been running down Maple Avenue  
dodging apples from friends, from strangers,

and holding my bruises somewhere  
deep inside where I am rotten.

## **Wrong Road Home**

I'm driving south on 79 in the northbound lane  
through the hills of West Virginia, where the crosses perch  
on mountain tops casting shadows over towns.  
Bare trees hold new life dormant in their branches,  
buds scabbed over in bark.

Back home my mother told me I'll never be a man.  
Her words hit the chilled air and turned to smoke.

All around me now, cars grinding guardrails,  
swerving out of passing lanes and into ditches.  
The sparks of metal-on-metal and me on cruise control,  
heading back home to an empty apartment  
as car horn blasts bounce off the rock and fade into the treetops.

I'll let the pollen stain the car hood, back home.  
I'll leave the keys on the table.

## **The Jar**

He thinks that Hell smells like pennies,  
so at night he gathers his spare change,  
puts the silver pieces in his bank, hides the pennies  
in an old mason jar under his bed.

In church, his quarters, nickels, dimes clank  
at the bottom of the collection plate, an Our Father  
for each coin to change his fate.

But some nights he reaches beneath his bed,  
twists open the rusted lid, and dreams of a kiss,  
a touch, of the rapture as his body turns white—  
blue—green—lost in a patina of skin,  
the tarnished tang of copper,  
the heavy perfume of old pennies.



## Letter From The Boy In The Attic

Dear What-I've-Become, I'm still here  
where you left me when you became too old.  
Imagine. I sweat. All day the bees in my chest-  
of-drawers. The hole in the screen window.

Fly strips swayed by some invisible breeze,  
boxes, the dust and fluff from animals.  
That bear we dragged from crib to bed  
to brown box in stale summer.

I've played the board games till the pieces  
fell through the cracks in the floor. Sorry  
in the ceiling above your bedroom. Clue  
in the hallway closet. It was in the conservatory,

tiny tin noose. Is there life out there?  
The Speak-and-Say tells me the cow says *Moove*,  
but I'm stuck in the attic heat, coloring the crayons  
to stubs, tangling up the Christmas lights,

banging away on this dusty typewriter  
before they take it all away  
for sale, for storage, for some charity  
that won't bring me closer to you.

## Niagara River

It is hard to cast lines in rough water,  
still we sat listening to the waves suck  
through the cracks in the rocks.

I never had the right flick in my wrist;  
never worked the courage  
to pierce the mud-caked worm.

He hooked them one by one from fresh water,  
a blade to the gut as they spilled over sun-baked stone.

I scrambled the break walls' boulders  
only to bleed upon the granite.

I can tell you this because I have held it in my hand:  
rusted metal in my fingertip,  
my father's favorite lure.

## **Things I Remember**

Twenty-eight eyes, five-times-seven,  
and the minutes she made us watch until  
he got the problem right.

He looked for the answers  
in the laces of his British Knights.

She waited patiently for what  
she knew would never come.

He could never hide the hand  
from a ruler rapped five-times-seven  
times across the back of chalk covered fingers.

Numbers can get lost in the dust of wrong answers.

A blackboard can make a boy look pale.

## **Conditional Bethlehem**

If flux, then burns,  
    white scars around the throat,  
        small circles of chemical spit seared into skin.

If overtime, then swollen hands, then steel  
                    in the neck, rods and screws to stiffen the spine,  
    head high, shoulders slumped, then armchair beers,  
                    then silence in the TV flash.

If worn welds, then fall apart,  
    throw hands in the blast furnace,  
                shake limbs loose,  
                cough coal from lungs.

If the tools are broken, then your wife  
                    falls to pieces, your son  
    is numb from the heat, then  
        you're choking on your words, then  
it will never be hot enough to make it all burn.

## **Sleep**

Moths pour from the fireplace  
like smoke, white, filling the room  
as I sleep, turn, kick the blanket  
to the floor. Does fever make me swim  
in my sheets, pillows sweat-soaked,  
or is it the heat from a new sun  
falling through my window?  
The air is moving, swarming  
and I choke unconscious  
falling past burning buildings.  
I hit the hardwood sore and shocked,  
wet and cold, the air empty, the room dark,  
a moth dead on my pillowcase.

### **Another Poem About Birds**

In Greensboro, they keep writing poems about birds,  
so I throw my hands in the air, see if they can fly, but no  
nothing sprouts wings. Here, my birds peck,  
wingless, hopping through the grass.  
I wonder what that says about me? In Greensboro,  
the robins stay silent at sunrise. They fall from the trees  
and hit ground with a thud, heavy feathered rain.  
They drag their bodies through the lawn,  
push aside the worms and mud.  
Dirt-stained talons dig shallow holes to hide in.  
I spend summer nights chasing away the strays.  
I always make sure to carry an umbrella.

## **Nikon**

Before the night is through  
I will feed you palm trees

and Vietcong, and when you are full,  
let me wipe any residue from your lens.

A tilt in your mirror lends  
itself to talk of dismissal,

but a tilt in my palm will compensate  
until it's all devoured, your body full

of bullets and beers, barracks and boonie hats,  
full of the jungle, the sun, the sweat.

Let the lens open, the shutter snap,  
let the light pour in like a blast of Napalm

and tear the horizon from the sky.

## **Finding Johnny Walker**

He lost his journal the week before,  
letters to a distant daughter, poems about lost faith.

I found him a month later, cold on a futon  
surrounded by empty bottles of wine and whiskey.

It had been three weeks, his sleep alone with the AC hum,  
a small body wrapped tight in a white cotton throw

and when the door opened I knew. Gone was the smell  
of aftershave and Pinot, whiskey and the stogie stench

I was used too, just the sweet smell of long passed death.  
I cleaned the apartment after his body was burned,

plastic sacks filled with old newspapers, garbage, clothes still soaked  
with the smell of him. On the floor I found a poem of mine,

something old about lost love, Apollo chasing Daphne  
through the streets of New York City, her concrete legs

holding up tall buildings. I was frozen, looking at the mess before me.  
Ovid turned him into a futon stain.

Sometimes, I pull my blankets tighter to my chin.  
Some days, I wrap his arms around me when I'm cold.



## **Happy 10<sup>th</sup> Birthday Betty Ann Johnson**

“You talk about not having cupcakes at birthday parties, and people freak out.”  
-Susan Fiore, Connecticut Department of Education

Vanilla linoleum smeared with frosting,  
rainbow sprinkles, bits of yellow  
cake stuck to the chalkboard. The kids  
were at recess.

It was the same surprise every year. Mrs. Johnson  
would enter, clear Tupperware box in hand, fourteen cakes  
baked to perfection for little Betty’s classmates. She would  
have it no other way.

They found the teacher on his back. Head tilted  
to the side on mauve and cream tiles, a halo of moist cake,  
tiny flecks resting on his collar  
beneath the two fatty lumps lodged down his throat.

Mrs. Johnson was found in the bathroom, washing  
cherry filling from her flowered dress. And the kids spent  
the rest of the day in the lunch room,  
blowing bubbles in their milk  
and Betty Ann blushed as they all sang Happy Birthday.

### **Cul-de-sac**

I plunge the knife into my chest,  
to bleed my lungs of air, and gasp  
over grass blades painted green  
against the white of a picket fence.  
I heave my guts into the daisies  
to make the toxic neighbors drool  
upon their concrete driveways.  
I will show them how to die,  
face melting in a polished car hood.  
I will show them how to bleed  
in perfect puddles: set aside a place  
to die the day before, chalk an outline,  
stand still and pray that they notice.  
I am on my knees now in a red halo,  
and I can see him coming closer,  
his blue eyes turning green,  
wishing he could bleed like me.

## Avenue

I still cringe at the sight of a brush burned knee.  
The small stones it leaves in the skin,  
the scabs that take their place. My nightmares have me  
facedown in the pavement, as it grates against my body.  
Knees bloodied, hands torn. I couldn't wait  
to wipe the road from my skin.

Every Fall one brave deer sprints from the woods  
in our backyard and up alongside the house  
to press its hooves on the pavement. As if playing off of some dare,  
running back, leaping over the hedgerow saying,  
*There, I touched the street, are you happy?*

## **The Believer**

I walk by the steeple, abandoned,  
wanting to pad barefoot through the grass  
and dirt, to step on cobalt blues  
and warm yellow shards of shattered windows,  
to walk beneath the rotting oak ribs,  
kneel on the decay of the altar.

I sweep my hand across a forgotten fence,  
filling fingers with splinters.  
At night, I pull them, one-by-one,  
from the tender pads of my fingertips,  
a burst of capillaries dot my flesh.

## **Stroke**

That year Halloween was Easter  
and you called me Jesus or Donny.  
My mom switched names with a dead dog.  
Your son was a cousin and your daughter a sister,  
and you laughed at these misfires  
knowing the brain is a strange, beautiful thing.  
Yet when you picked up the phone and spoke  
with such clarity, "Your father just left,  
he should be home in twenty minutes"  
I couldn't help but wonder if faces were the problem,  
if it was sight that failed you, not speech.  
Every time I come home to visit, your red-rimmed eyes  
swell with tears as though this moment was  
the first or last time you've seen me.

## Notes For My Unwritten Autobiography

I watched infomercials in my underwear. Rifled  
through my brother's porn collection. It was Sunday.

I was twelve. I was fourteen and prayed to be killed,  
stricken, wheelchair bound so I'd have a reason.

She kissed me on the school bus, and I changed my seat.  
She kissed me on the curb and I drove away.  
She kissed me and I was sure I would have to quit my job.

I went from quiet to shy to asexual, back to shy, and straight  
on into gay. I would have made a good husband. Good father. Good  
priest? I would live alone and reside in Hell  
or Buffalo.

It took me three years to see I was the common denominator. Three years  
to realize postmodernism in useless. Years to find  
the right amount of tongue. Trial and Error.

Twenty-one: he kissed me in his car, then on his bed. Too much spit.  
We had sex while his roommate was gone, while his roommate was there we had sex.  
In the shower. He'd shampoo my hair. Bad blowjobs. Too much teeth.  
Those were the craziest two weeks of my life.

He kissed me and I stopped  
picking up the phone. He kissed me and I dropped out of English 502.  
He kissed me and I fucked him and I might have ruined his life. I think.  
Too highly of myself sometimes.

I was twenty-three. I let him blow me because I was bored or lonely.  
His going-grey hair. His too-soft skin.  
He reminded me of a pedophile.

Twenty-four. Maybe this could have been love. This  
was not love. It was over and I couldn't cry. Over and I threw up  
at night. Over and over again.

I was young when I realized I couldn't play house. Old when I realized I was expected  
to play house, all picket fences and day care. I need a job, need a life.  
I need to get over myself.

## **Last Note In A Burning High-Rise**

It rains inside,  
    tiny drops that pop and hiss along the concrete skillet floor,  
        steam and smoke and I am shallow lung and helium high  
with no way down.

I write myself  
    in heat and ashes. I write myself apology.  
    Yes, I painted the trees royal in the neighbor's front yard.  
Yes, I drank liquor cabinets.  
    No, it was not as cold inside me as you thought.

I stand above these stories now,  
    and forgive you for your shame, for the months you turned me away.

I loved, just not the way you planned.

Do you remember the way the trees would talk?  
    My summers spent, hands sap-stuck to limbs, telling stories to the air?

When the time comes, I will not scream.  
    I will raise my crooked branches to the sky.

### **The Next Step**

Cold on the concrete stoop,  
I watch the cars pass by,  
nose into the intersection,  
the squeal of tires and inebriated motion.  
I swig a beer, watch breath cloud the air.  
What is the next step?  
Go back into the apartment, listen to the birds,  
watch your chest in the motion of sleep  
and wonder if I could allow myself such serenity.  
Or walk out into the intersection,  
wait for a couple on their way home,  
wash my body in rain and headlights,  
pray that they see the green change  
to red in these abandoned streets.



### **Rain After Lightning**

Rain falls into my bed

and I throw my arms out to catch him.

All night I lay listening to storms burst

from his bones and shake his limbs.

I wonder if I am the cause,

if the touch of my skin conducts these flashbacks.

Outside, lightning strikes a steeple,

Rain whispers *Sorry* and I pull him closer.

Wind throws water against the windowpane,

eyes twitch under lids.

I add another blanket to the bed.

## **The Sky Throws Down Its Constellations**

Orion clings to my rooftop, his feet too close to frozen grass.  
We've done this before. The same pleas outside the closed  
window. Some respite from the cold, more heat to help  
the journey back home. Things burnout when stranded:  
a heart, bonfires, night. It has reached its apex, waves turn  
as the lake shovels snow into clouds. A liar hangs  
outside my window, losing grip, flames for feet now crystallize.  
One more forgive me as fingers slip off shingles.  
Tomorrow will bring scorched sheets,  
his belt left on the floor in haste,  
snowflakes on the floorboards from a window left ajar.

## **Offering**

He whispered hymnals in my ear,  
breath heavy from wine.  
This is my body-  
on-body,  
a consequence of spirit.

## **Mapping the Body**

I trace him from earlobe  
down jawbone through fields  
of day old stubble  
to smooth a kink in the sideburn  
with the pad of my thumb.  
His neck bends and curves  
into a crag of collarbone, a rough ride for hands  
as they rumble over ribs, falling  
further down torso, into a pool  
of soft fuzz around a shallow navel.

I chart from the curve of the hip  
to the fold beneath a cheek,  
fingertips riding a thin vein  
down the back of bowed legs to the slow  
arch of a foot, and back up the other side,  
touching the stray mole on the dimple  
of the buttock, the milky  
scar above the left nipple, as the steam  
of the shower consumes the mirror.

## **Niagara Falls**

for the only man he's ever fucked and woke up alongside the next morning.

into a Niagara-shaped hole so perfect you would swear it was made just for him.

after the other wirewalkers have gone home.

for the old "I'll call you" trick.

into Niagara Falls and over Niagara Falls and again and again and again.

## **The Apocalyptic**

In bed, tonight, I masturbate,  
read from the book of Revelation,  
and try to feel guilt like a good Catholic.

In sleep, I ride with the horsemen:  
the apocalyptic. A man  
who can bring other men to their knees.

Under the bloody-bruise of sky, I fuck,  
sweat dripping from the brows of men,  
blistering skin in the heat of a dying sun.

I wade through the melting concrete of cities,  
an end-time prophet. My bedposts slam into walls  
with the sound of seven thunders.

For a moment, a flashback: Rain kisses the space  
between my shoulder blades.  
We break the seventh seal. There is no turning back.

Now, there is only raw flesh, growing blackness of sky, and me  
in the middle of it all. No penance enough to save us,  
only the hope to wake, not the rider, not the ridden.

## **Dinner**

Wax spills down the shaft of a candlestick,  
billows and cools in soft folds on an oak table.  
I sit watching the melt, the drip, the waves of wax  
make their way toward your empty chair.  
Tonight, the CD skips something, broken.  
A shame to waste the wine so I unscrew the cork,  
pour enough for two, finger the lip of the glass.  
I sleep, my clothes a cotton lump at the base of the bed.  
My stomach the only thing full. On my tongue  
I taste the bitter end of rosemary.

## **Lessons In Interior Design: The Bed**

It was a 17<sup>th</sup> century restoration, dark mahogany placed on a platform, draped in layers of cloth. Our own personal big top brimming with pillows to catch the stray tightrope walker.

Her mission was clear: teach three virginal high schoolers the high art or the fabric swatch, her arthritic hands mustering the nerve to grasp the duvet, to poke and prod the mattress cover.

She called it our stage, main attraction, our post-union performance area and we were just would-be players she had granted access to her wisdom. She did not want us to hide our productions in some corner of the house

like a bastard child. No. Our acts should be out on display for all to see. She raved about the bed's age and construction. By this point it had seen many acrobats, several nervous knife throwers, some jugglers, a contortionist or two,

maybe even a lion tamer, whose whip could easily be stored in a matching side table. She had the bed enlarged for the display. The performers of the past would have reveled in this luxury.

More space to put on the spectacle, room for a larger cast, stadium-style seating for an audience, perhaps. We left her studio newly ordained ringmasters, as she cried out, voice cracking,

*Celebrate the bed.*



## **Breaking Up With Georges Seurat**

I found a piece of you in bed underneath my pillow,  
and as I wiped you away with an open palm I realized  
it was time to change the sheets.

So I took you down to Riverside to talk about distance  
in the shadows of abandoned grain elevators. You skipped stones,  
said things that, in hindsight, don't make sense.

I've tried to move on, bought a book about expressionism.  
I keep it next to a picture of us  
and that box of condoms I'll never use.

I still look under my pillow at night, thinking  
about the miles between us, the mistake I made,  
looking for a speck of you that isn't there.

### **The Ex Goes On Late Night TV to Talk About His Latest Project**

Here's the setup. My favorite scene. Before this there was sex, of course. You'll see the walk to the car. Mundane. This is the day I don't come back. A monologue about space, an allusion to small earthquakes underground. He doesn't know. Here's the play it cool. Here's the misty-eyed. Poor schmuck. You can't fake that. I'm thinking SAG Award. I'm thinking Oscar. I'm in talks with a new actor. Maybe there's a sequel here, who knows? Just roll the clip. Watch him lose it, again and again.

## **Without Water**

Rain left months ago

without saying goodbye.

We're all cracked lips,

puckered dirt, faint breath

sour from the heat.

We no longer sweat.

*Come back*

*tell me I'll love you*

*like you want me to.*

### Greeting Card Poem

Sympathy is a puppy in the bucket of a well,  
grief, a countryside tea service for one.  
There is no making sense of this. No clear occasion.  
I browse, waiting for something to say, *take me home*.  
Friendship is a rusty bicycle, love, a faux velvet bird.  
My hands are full.

I'll keep the inside empty,  
or maybe a *get well soon* or *this too shall pass*,  
in spite of my better judgment, here  
take this pastel mountaintop, this windblown wheat field.  
I'm holding out my hands. I'm waiting  
for a direction. Pick one.

## What I Knew

before the first date, first cigarette, before sitting on the stoop  
in summer, before beer bottles and wine bottles,  
cobalt blue, before back braced against the countertop, hands in jean pockets,  
before punk rock or indie rock or *What the Hell am I listening to?*  
before intellectual masturbation, actual masturbation, insecurity,  
before my boxers on the floor, before  
a month in bed with Mono, a forgotten birthday,  
before awkward concert dancing, awkward first-kiss-dancing,  
before second guessing and *I can't read you*,  
before the cold side of the shower, before moving and boxes, apathy,  
before hello and goodbye and infinite meaningless gestures,  
I was gone,  
long before love, or fuck, or please  
forgive me for what I am about to do.

## **This Night**

a strobe to keep me awake,  
blue lights of a cop car,  
and the voice of some girl screaming  
the name of a boy she might have loved.  
I run down this road, streetlight swept  
through puddles on pavement, your name  
in each drop on my head. Let's get literal  
for a second. Let's call us a car wreck.  
Let's say the moon is half-faced, peering  
through the bare trees, the air is cold  
and escapes my mouth like fog.  
You're behind the wheel. Let's say  
I wipe the sweat from my forehead  
with a red wristband, the one you thought  
you lost. Some things you will discover too late.  
The breaks worn thin when the tires squeal,  
the seatbelt strap to the stomach, the bruise  
it leaves behind. This sudden stop, this shadow  
that becomes human when it is too late  
to save him, like so many  
shards of window glass on a rain-slick road.

## Cartwheels

You are you or someone like you  
doing cartwheels through leaf piles,  
you acrobat, batter up, shutout, shut-in, here  
where you'll sleep till two on weekdays,  
where the butler's never bothered by the bell,  
wringing sweat from washcloths on your brow,  
you brother wants to be you, your father  
says you're the man of the house, wives  
speak breathless of your passion plays,  
your life-of-the-party, animals  
released from their cages, roaming the streets, and you  
flipping the bird, the channel, through the lawn  
where the leaves puddle like mercury  
from a broken thermometer, thermostat, heat too high  
so you add a cube to your tea, sit back  
in your armchair, arms crossed, armed,  
waiting for the door to break down, beat down, beat up  
with a shiner on your eye  
patched up, stitched up, shoulder in a sling  
from the fall, the flipping, the wheels  
just outside your doorjamb squeak like animals  
carting you, away you, or someone you are.